



Graduate Employability Post COVID-19: The Case of a Malaysian Public University

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GRADUATE EMPLOYABILITY POST COVID-19: THE CASE OF A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study presents an effort to identify and understand the impact of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic on the graduate employability (GE) of Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) final year students. It examines the readiness of USIM's final year students to the internship during the lockdown period, the readiness to join GE programs and also employment prospects in the future.

Design/Methodology/Approach – A questionnaire survey was employed, and 1,445 USIM final year students participated in this study.

Findings – The findings reveal that USIM final year students are ready to perform their internship even during the lockdown period. Besides, they are also ready to join GE programs conducted by USIM even while COVID-19 pandemic still currently occurs. Meanwhile, for the employment prospects in the future, results show that they believed that the employment prospects in the future after COVID-19 is low. In addition, academic background and internship areas exacerbate COVID-19's impact on the perceptions of USIM final year students on the employment prospects in the future.

Originality/Value – This study is believed to be a pioneering study in identifying the impact of COVID-19 on the GE. It also contributes by identifying students' readiness to perform their internship during lockdown period via work from home (WFH) approach as well as their perceptions on the employment prospects in the future.

Keywords: graduate employability (GE), readiness, employment prospect, work from home (WFH), COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic is a new tragedy in human civilisation. It was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan China and spread rapidly, resulting in an on-going global pandemic (Hui et al., 2020). As COVID-19 is primarily spread between people during close contact, either via coughing, sneezing or talking (WHO, 2020), social distancing became the leading preventive approach adopted by most countries which have introducing restrictions on movements or lockdown orders, including Malaysia.

Malaysia introduced several phases of movement control orders or lockdown starting from 18-31 March, followed by 1-14 April, 15-28 April, 29 April - 11 May 2020, 12 May - 9 June and the latest is from 12 May – 31 August 2020. Since the introduction of lockdown, people are required to restrict their activities by working from home (WFH) and almost all economic sectors were closed except for essential services. Included in the essential services are food; healthcare; water; energy; security and defence; solid waste and public cleansing; communication; banking and finance; e-commerce and logistics (Bernama, 2020b).

Due to this restriction, it is just not affecting the economic activities of the existing employers and employees, but it also affecting the work of interns. All students who are currently having their internship need to follow the movement control order including for the final year students from the Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). Like most of the other employees, interns are also supposed to practice work from home (WFH) approach. Hence, this situation affected practical assessments that were supposedly to be learned by interns especially for works that required physical teamwork, skills and engagements which cannot be covered by WFH approach.

In addition, the economic slowdown due to COVID-19 raised another important issue for these interns which is graduate employability (GE). Based on the special survey on COVID-19 conducted by the Department of Statistics of Malaysia (DOSM), food and beverages industries became the main sector where the workers are losing their jobs which is 35.4%, followed by agriculture (21.9%) and construction (11.8%). Besides, 46.6% of self-employments are losing their jobs due to COVID-19 (DOSM, 2020b). In addition, Malaysian Employers Federation believes the COVID-19 will cost more than two million people in Malaysia their jobs and the unemployment rate would soar to 10% or even 15% (Hoh, 2020). Therefore, identifying and understanding the impact of COVID-19 especially on the GE of USIM final year students is becoming an important issue.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Graduate Employability (GE) in Malaysia

In general, GE can be identified the ability of a graduate to get and stay in the job and to be able to adapt to the needs of the industry (Suleman, 2016). Similarly, GE is defined as skills that are required to be fulfilled and meet the needs of an employee (Bustamam et al., 2015). Meanwhile, GE also is known as willingness to work and combined with an individual's work ethic, entrepreneurial knowledge, creative and innovative, interpersonal and thinking skills and learning skills (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Van der Heijden et al., 2009; Rothwell & Arnold, 2007).

For several past decades, the job market is increasingly demanding graduates to compete and they need to possess a variety of skills to market their capabilities and academic qualifications. Normally, graduates tend to fail because they do not demonstrate this marketability and by only showing their academic merit (Ali et al., 2018). Some of the skills required are such as verbal and written communication, problem solving, teamwork, personal qualities, leadership, analytical and also technical skills (Suleman, 2016; Hamid et al., 2013). These skills can be categorized into five dimensions which are: (i) application skill; (ii) self-efficacy; (iii) metacognition; (iv) entrepreneurship skill; and (v) soft-skill (Ali et al., 2018).

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4 In Malaysian context, there are six major issues concerning on GE identified, which
5 are: (i) unknown market size and the need for a high income economy; (ii) unknown intake
6 and exit attributes except for a few professional courses; (iii) poor intake attributes; (iv) the
7 notion that industry prefers ready-made instead of fundamentals; (v) stop-gap measures
8 versus immersion at higher education level; and (vi) not obtaining the right choice of courses
9 (MOHE, 2012). These issues normally lead to problems faced by Malaysian employers
10 especially in hiring fresh graduates. Some of the problems include lack of essential
11 employability skills, mismatches between expected salaries and those on offer and the
12 inadequacy of graduates on specialised programmes (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014). This situation
13 has created an imbalance between supply and demand, forcing graduates to accept jobs less
14 than commensurated with their qualifications (Yoong et al., 2016).

15
16 There are lots of researches conducted previously in order to identify and understand
17 the environment as well as the issues and challenges for Malaysian GE. Based on the
18 literature, it can be summarised that the main issue is about employability skills. For instance,
19 Rasul et al. (2013) study attempted to investigate the importance of employability skills as
20 perceived by employers from manufacturing industries. In this case, 107 manufacturing
21 employers were involved and the results highlight that these employers place great
22 importance to communication skills, problem solving skills, team work skills and personal
23 qualities. In addition, another study by Cheng et al. (2018) also reveals that perceptions on
24 mismatch between job and academic background played no role in graduates' inability to
25 secure gainful employment quickly. The real issues are about skills, knowledge, and
26 shortcomings in English language proficiency.

27
28 In terms of the employability skills development, Hamid et al. (2013) found that the
29 most effective approach for employability skills development is work integrated learning.
30 This followed by stand-alone subject model, academic support programme, embedded subject
31 model, non-academic support programme and the least is campus life activities. Similarly,
32 Jaffar et al. (2016) also found that 105 employers were perceived that work integrated
33 learning programs taught by universities are able to align between what is learned by
34 graduates with the workplace environment.

35
36 In addition, Rahim and Lajin (2015) claims that social entrepreneurship inculcates
37 important interpersonal skills that are reported as lacking among graduates in securing jobs.
38 Besides, social entrepreneurship also enhances the employability as it creates a differentiation
39 and makes the graduates stand out from the others, networking and rapport were built during
40 university years, increasing the chances of employability and also provides value-added
41 experience to the graduates. This had been supported by another study by Bustamam et al.
42 (2015) where they perceived on the importance to equip graduates with entrepreneurial skills
43 relevant to the market so that graduates will be able to be independent in terms of their career.

44
45 Meanwhile, for multiple perceptions on employability skills between employers and
46 graduates, Singh and Singh (2008) found that both employers and graduates placed similar
47 importance in terms of the ranking of employability skills. However, later study made by Ang
48 (2015) reveals that several skills such as commercial awareness/knowledge about the
49 business, self-management, computer literacy, information retrieval, planning, and resolving
50 conflict were not considered as critical by students yet are highly valued by the employers of
51 the industries.

52
53 This mismatch perception between employers and graduates further brings into
54 another argument where employability skills is not becoming the sole attribute for Malaysian
55 GE issues. This had been supported by a previous study conducted on 200 graduates from
56 Universiti Malaysia Sabah that found that attributes such as knowledge, ICT skills, technical
57 skills, problem solving, communication skills, team work, leadership, professionalism and
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ethics have no significant relationship with the employment status of the graduates (Nazron et al., 2017).

Thus, this argument brings into other factors that may contribute to Malaysian GE issues. One of the issues that probably impacting on Malaysian GE is on the readiness of Malaysian graduates to work after their graduation. In this case, a study conducted by Yusof and Jamaluddin (2015) highlights that more than 50% of the respondents from Universiti Malaysia Perlis's engineering students did not have planning and strategies to reach the objective of their employability upon completion of study. On the other hand, another study conducted by Jayasingam et al. (2018) on 244 human resources executives who are experienced in employee recruitment reveals that being choosy has a detrimental effect on Malaysian GE even if it comes from highly competent graduates. Moreover, graduates' attributes, lecturers' competency and the quality of education also become among the factors that contribute to Malaysian GE issues (Hanapi & Nordin, 2014). Last but not least, a study on 457 Universiti Utara Malaysia found that apart from English language proficiency skills, ethnicity and types of academic degree become the major factors for unemployment issue in Malaysia (Lim, 2010).

Regardless of these factors that contribute to Malaysian GE, the Malaysian government through the Ministry of Higher Education started to pay attention on Malaysian GE issues. In this case, the ministry introduced the Graduates Tracer Study System (Sistem Kajian Pengesanan Graduan@SKPG) in order to identify the employability status and issues among new graduates yearly. The findings from this study are important as it will be used to insight the government in making suitable decisions and policies with regards to GE.

The study was first conducted in 2002 by the Economic Planning Unit on public universities and polytechnics in Malaysia. Later in 2003, the study was re-structured and centralized by the Department of Higher Education (Kardi et al., 2009). In 2006, the study was first to be made via online. Next in 2008, the follow-up study was conducted regularly and in 2014, the follow-up study was conducted on continuous basis. Latest in 2018, the study also included the graduates from several other higher education categories other than universities and polytechnics such as the community colleges and the public training skills institutions.

At present, the SKPG system is divided into two phases. For SKPG 1.0, the graduates for each particular year are able to fill-up the survey after their completion of study until the end of the year. Meanwhile, SKPG 2.0 is a follow-up study made available after the end of SKPG 1.0 until the end of February for the following year covering two months period. The SKPG survey contains information on graduate profile, academic studies, internships, socio-economic status and employment status.

For those who are employed, the working information collected includes the level of employment, types of working and economic sectors, monthly salary, employer's/self-employment information and also relation between the current employments with their previous academic qualifications. Meanwhile, for those who are unemployed, the study will ask on reasons for not working, frequency of attending interviews, expected salary and also method used to find employment vacancies. While, for those who further the study, the academic information collected will include the program, institution, expected graduation, sponsorship and also relation with previous academic qualification. Besides, the SKPG system also made an evaluation on curriculum, career guidance, teaching staff as well as facilities during their previous academic study.

Graduate Employability (GE) in USIM

For the last five years, the average USIM GE score is about 70.39%, which below the target set by the Ministry of Higher Education which is 80% (Latib, 2019). As one of the bottom six

Malaysian public universities for GE scores, USIM was awarded a special GE grants by the Ministry of Higher Education amounting RM 1,500,960 in order to run 16 GE programs for the year 2019. As a result, USIM managed to be on the 6th rank among all 20 Malaysian public universities with the drastic two digit (21.5%) increase in GE score up to 93.05% in 2019. The detail for the GE score is shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1: USIM GE Score 2015-2019

Details	Scores (%)				
	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
GE Score Category					
Working	80.98	58.3	55.23	54.53	55.04
Furthering Studies	2.80	5.10	5.60	5.10	5.60
Attending Skill Enhancement Courses	2.00	2.80	4.00	4.00	3.10
Waiting for Placement	7.27	5.90	5.50	4.60	5.00
Total GE Score	93.05	72.10	71.00	68.60	69.10
Unemployed Score	6.95	27.90	29.00	31.40	30.90
Total Scores	100	100	100	100	100

Note: Data were derived from SKPG 1.0 and SKPG 2.0

Based on Table 1 above, the results show significant impact by GE programs run by USIM in 2019 when it increased the total GE score especially in the working category from 58.3% in 2018 to 80.98% in 2019. Besides, this result indirectly decreased the unemployed scores from 27.9% in 2018 to only 6.95% in 2019. While, the other GE score categories did not differentiate much in 2019 as compared to 2018 where 2.3% was for furthering studies, 0.8% for attending skill enhancement courses and 1.37% for waiting for placement. Furthermore, the GE score based on academic programs offered is shown as in Table 2.

Table 2: USIM GE Score 2018-2019 Based on Academic Programs

GE Score Category	Academic Programs	
	2019	2018
Below 50%	0	0
50%-59%	0	3
60%-69%	0	8
70%-79%	1	10
80% and Above	25	5
Total Academic Programs	26	26

Note: Data were derived from SKPG 1.0 and SKPG 2.0

From academic programs' perspective, Table 2 highlights significant improvement for USIM GE score according to academic programs offered by USIM. In 2019, all USIM academic programs for undergraduates were scored 80% and above except one program which is the Bachelor of Law and Shariah. Compared to 2018, only 5 academic programs scored 80% and above. Meanwhile, other 21 academic programs were below the GE target score with 10 academic programs scored between 70%-79%, eight academic programs scored between 60%-69% and other three academic programs scored between 50%-59%. The USIM GE score based on 16 GE programs conducted in 2019 is shown as in Table 3.

Table 3: USIM GE Scores for 16 GE Programs in 2019

Details	Number	Percentage (%)
GE Score Category		
Working	590	81.27
Furthering Studies	36	4.96
Attending Skill Enhancement Courses	40	5.51

Waiting for Placement	24	3.30
Total GE Score	690	95.04
Unresponded	18	2.48
Unemployed Score	18	2.48
Total Scores	726	100

Note: Data were derived from SKPG 1.0 and SKPG 2.0 Systems 2019

Based on Table 3, a total of 726 graduates participated in all 16 GE programs in 2019. From this figure, 590 graduates (81.27%) were working, 36 graduates (4.96%) were furthering their studies, 40 graduates (5.51%) were attending skill enhancement courses and 24 graduates (3.3%) were waiting for placement. There were 18 graduates (2.48%) who did not respond to the survey and only 18 graduates (2.48%) were found to be unemployed. This indicated that all 16 GE programs in 2019 significantly contributed about 29.64% (690 out of 2,328 graduates) from total USIM GE score 93.05% in 2019.

Graduate Employability (GE) Issues and Challenges due to COVID-19

Regardless the above GE achievements by USIM, it is expected that in year 2020, GE will become more challenging due to COVID-19. In this situation, existing factors that may contribute to Malaysian GE issues such as skills, readiness to work, being choosy, graduates' attributes, lecturers' competency, quality of education, ethnicity and types of academic degree (Jayasingam et al., 2018; Yusof & Jamaluddin, 2015; Hanapi & Nordin, 2014; Lim, 2010) were believed not the main factors anymore.

For instance, employment opportunities sharply decreased due to the rise in number of closed businesses due to inability to survive during COVID-19. According to the Malaysian Computer and Multimedia Industry Association, about 40% of new technology companies are expected to be closed due to COVID-19 (Bernama, 2020a). In addition, about 650,000 micro businesses cannot operate due to lockdown order and inability to pay their employees (Mohd Amin, 2020).

Moreover, citing that the latest unemployment rate in Malaysia had risen to 5.3% in May 2020, the number of unemployment increased into about 826,000 persons (Zulkapli, 2020). This figure is believed to continuously rise into two million people and the unemployment rate would soar to 10% or even 15% (Hoh, 2020). By taking into account the new fresh graduate numbers amounting between 300,000 to 350,000 yearly (DOSM, 2020a), this will become another challenge for graduates including USIM final year students to compete with existing unemployed employees.

Furthermore, due to lockdown order, readiness for Malaysian employees including interns to apply WFH approach is becoming another issue. Although several big companies such as Permodalan Malaysia Berhad (PNB) has already started to continue WFH approach even after pandemic (Bernama, 2020c), many other companies are yet to adapt with this approach. Besides, some studies indicated that excessive employer surveillance during WFH will have physical and emotional effects leading to decreased in productivity (Adams et al., 2000). WFH also faces disadvantages such as a possible sense of isolation, lack of separation between work and home, costs involved in the transition to new work methods, training, damage to commitment and identification with the organisation and society, with the possible danger of creating detached individuals (Harpaz, 2002). Moreover, children demand considerable attention and time from their parents during WFH, which might bring parents into time-related conflicts and contribute to increased emotional demands at home (Peeters et al., 2005). Therefore, the main purpose of internship which is to expose graduates on the real working environment might be affected.

Last but not least, graduates with internship experiences and being paid during their internship are having high chances to receive a job offer as compared to the one with unpaid

internship (Held, 2016). However, many companies are closed and many more are financially suffering as effect of economic slowdown due to COVID-19. For instance, two major Malaysian airlines companies announced that they will cut their employees' salaries due to slow in demand until the end of this pandemic (Mohamad & Alias, 2020). This will become another GE challenge during COVID-19 which is the capability of employers to pay internship salaries or wages.

Based on the above challenges and issues on GE during COVID-19, the implementation of internships and GE programs especially by USIM students are becoming more important and crucial. Therefore, these programs are supposed to become more relevant and need to be implemented in order to cater GE.

METHODOLOGY

In total, 1,445 out of 2,559 USIM final year students (56.47%) answered the survey. Table 4 summarises the background information of these students.

Table 4: Respondent's Background Information

Details	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender:		
Male	348	24.1
Female	1,097	75.9
Faculty:		
Faculty of Economics & Muamalat (FEM)	342	23.7
Faculty of Engineering & Built Environment (FKAB)	15	1
Faculty of Leadership & Management (FKP)	234	16.2
Faculty of Major Language Studies (FPBU)	152	10.5
Faculty of Quranic & Sunnah Studies (FPQS)	354	24.5
Faculty of Medicine & Health Sciences (FPSK)	11	0.8
Faculty of Science & Technology (FST)	217	15
Faculty of Syariah & Law (FSU)	120	8.3
Internship Sector:		
Public	557	38.5
Private	831	57.6
Others	57	3.9
Internship Area:		
Capital City	254	17.6
City	963	66.6
Rural	204	14.1
Oversea	24	1.7
Internship Allowance:		
None	523	36.2
Below RM 500	675	46.7
RM 501 – RM 1,000	215	14.9
More than RM 1,000	32	2.2

Based on Table 4, the gap between male and female students is quite huge (51.8%), where 348 males responded compared to 1,097 female respondents. This is not surprising as about 70% of USIM's students consist of more female students (MOHE, 2020). While, for academic background, responses showed mixed backgrounds where students with social science background (FEM, FKP, FPBU, FPQS and FSU) were dominant (83.2%), as compared to students with science background (FKAB, FPSK and FST) (16.8%). This reflects the composition of USIM students based on faculty. Besides, FKAB is newly established and FPSK is only offered to a minimum number of students.

In terms of internship sector, more than half of the students for this survey are doing their internship in private sectors (57.6%), followed by public (38.5%) and other (3.9%)

sectors. In this case, other sectors are including government linked companies, statutory bodies and non-profit organizations. Meanwhile, for internship area, majority of the students have their intership in the city (66.6%), followed by capital city (17.6%), and the least is rural area (14.1%). It means that students conducting their intership are scattered across Malaysia regardless of the the location of their employers. Besides, there are also about 1.7% of the students who are performing their internship outside Malaysia.

Lastly, for internship allowance per month, more than half of the students received below than RM500 per month (46.7%). While, 36.2% do not received any allowance during their internship. Another 14.9% of the students received between RM501-RM1,000 per month and only 2.2% students received more than RM1,000 allowance per month. This suggests that majority of the students were receiving allowance during their internship period.

Meanwhile, in order to investigate the impact of COVID-19 especially on the GE of USIM final year students, questionnaire surveys were divided into three categories, namely (i) readiness to perform internship during MCO period; (ii) readiness to join GE programs; and (iii) employment prospects in the future. Under readiness to internship during MCO period, five items relating on WFH approached (Baker et al., 2007; Ranganathan, 2018; Weeks, 2004). In order to measure the readiness, this study employed a 5-point Likert-scale consisting of “(1) = very low” to “(5) = very high”. Meanwhile, for both readiness to join GE programs and employment prospects in the future, another five items for each category were developed using the same 5-point Likert-scale.

In total, 15 items were identified and used in this study. Table 5 lists all the questions regarding the impact of COVID-19 especially on the GE of USIM final year students in terms of their readiness to go through internship during MCO, readiness to join GE programs and also their views on the employment prospects in the future.

Table 5: Measurement for the Impacts of COVID-19 on the GE of USIM Final Year Students

Aspects	Measurements
Readiness to Internship during MCO Period	Prepare a guideline to WFH
	Take care of your safety in performing internship via WFH
	Provide adequate facilities to WFH
	Give psychological and moral support in performing WFH
	Managed to adopt WFH environment
Readiness to Join GE Programs	Still can be conducted
	Can be conducted at USIM
	Must be free of charge
	Must not exceed 100 participants for each session
	Preferred to be conducted via online
Employment Prospects in the Future	Malaysian economy is not affected
	There are job opportunities
	New businesses will arise and offer job opportunities
	Furthering studies is the best option
	Better to work in government sector

FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

This section discusses the empirical findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the GE of USIM's final year students by three categories, namely (i) readiness to go through internship during MCO period; (ii) readiness to join GE programs; and (iii) employment prospects in the future. All items were analysed by comparing the means. A further analysis was also performed by considering differences by several students' attributes such as gender (male versus female), academic background (science versus social science) and internship area (capital city versus city versus rural) as suggested by Ang (2015).

Readiness to Complete Internship during Lockdown Period

Table 6: Readiness to Complete Internship during Lockdown Period

Statement	Full Sample Mean	Gender		Academic Background		Internship Area		
		Male (Mean)	Female (Mean)	Science (Mean)	Social Science (Mean)	Capital City (Mean)	City (Mean)	Rural (Mean)
<i>During lockdown, your internship organisation:</i>								
1. Prepares a guideline to WFH	3.498	3.552	3.481	3.464	3.507	3.327	3.563	3.314
2. Takes care of your safety in performing internship via WFH	4.207	4.264	4.189	4.227	3.866	4.209	4.181	4.255
3. Provides adequate facilities to WFH	3.619	3.695	3.595	3.614	3.595	3.500	3.638	3.613
4. Gives psychological and moral support in performing WFH	3.376	3.506	3.335	3.375	3.515	3.240	3.389	3.373
5. Manages to adopt WFH environment	3.562	3.618	3.544	3.530	3.626	3.504	3.559	3.569
Overall Mean	3.653	3.727	3.629	3.642	3.622	3.556	3.666	3.625

Notes: male ($N = 348$) versus female ($N = 1,097$); science ($N = 243$) versus social science ($N = 1,202$); and capital city ($N = 254$) versus city ($N = 963$) versus rural ($N = 204$).

Based on Table 6, the results show that 73.06% (mean = 3.653) believed that they were ready to perform their internship during COVID-19 by WFH approach. Among all five items under readiness to internship, the most significant contribution is due to safety in performing internship via WFH (84.14%, mean = 4.207). This is followed by adequate facilities to WFH (72.38%, mean = 3.619), managed to adopt WFH environment (71.24%, mean = 3.562), preparation of guideline to WFH (69.96%, mean = 3.498) and psychological and moral support in performing WFH (67.52%, mean = 3.376).

For comparison between males and females, there is a significant difference (1.96%, mean difference = 0.098) regarding their beliefs in the readiness to WFH during COVID-19. However, there is no statistically significant difference regarding their belief based on academic background (0.4%, mean difference = 0.020). Similarly, there is no statistically significant difference in internship area. In this case, results show that students who have their internship at capital city area perceived that they have the lowest readiness as compared to city (2.2%, mean difference = 0.110) and rural (1.38%, mean difference = 0.069) areas to perform internship via WFH approach.

Overall, our results suggested that USIM final year students are ready for internship during lockdown period. Male students, in particular, express higher levels of agreement to such readiness to internship via WFH approach. This is opposite from the previous findings that found female students seem more prepared than male students including on GE (Ang, 2015). However, it is surprising to know that students who had their intership at rural area have a higher agreement to such readiness to internship via WFH. Perhaps this happened as rural area is the most unaffected on the outbreak of COVID-19 as compared to capital city and city areas. This findings on the readiness to internship during lockdown period also supported previous study by Pillai et al. (2012) where they found that most of the students were prepared to face the world of working including in this challenging times of COVID-19.

Readiness to Join GE Programs

Table 7: Readiness to Join GE Programs

Statement	Full Sample Mean	Gender		Academic Background		Internship Area		
		Male (Mean)	Female (Mean)	Science (Mean)	Social Science (Mean)	Capital City (Mean)	City (Mean)	Rural (Mean)
<i>Due to COVID-19, GE programs:</i>								
1. Still can be conducted	4.204	4.190	4.208	4.220	4.180	4.232	4.184	4.275
2. Can be conducted at USIM	4.042	4.098	4.025	3.829	4.023	3.984	4.057	4.054
3. Must be free of charge	4.652	4.667	4.647	4.450	4.664	4.669	4.648	4.652
4. Must not exceed 100 participants for each session	4.008	3.966	4.021	4.208	3.970	4.087	3.975	4.044
5. Preferred to be conducted via online	3.769	3.828	3.750	3.779	3.761	3.823	3.746	3.814
Overall Mean	4.135	4.150	4.130	4.107	4.120	4.159	4.122	4.168

Notes: male ($N = 348$) versus female ($N = 1,097$); science ($N = 243$) versus social science ($N = 1,202$); and capital city ($N = 254$) versus city ($N = 963$) versus rural ($N = 204$).

Table 7 shows the readiness to join GE programs. In general, the findings reveal that 82.7% (mean = 4.135) of students believed that they are ready to join GE programs even while COVID-19 pandemic is currently occurred. Among all five items under this category, the most significant is GE programs must be free of charge (93.04%, mean = 4.652). This is followed by GE programs still can be conducted during COVID-19 (84.08%, mean = 4.204), GE programs can be conducted at USIM (80.84%, mean = 4.042), GE programs must not exceed 100 participants for each session (81.16%, mean = 4.008) and the least is GE programs is preferred to be conducted via online (75.38%, mean = 3.769).

In comparison between male and females, there is no significant difference (0.4%, mean difference = 0.020) regarding their readiness to join GE programs. Similarly, there is no statistically significant difference regarding their belief based on academic background (0.26%, mean difference = 0.013). There is also no statistically significant difference in internship area. In this case, results show that students who have their internship at rural area perceive that they have the highest readiness as compared to capital city (0.18%, mean difference = 0.009) and city (0.92%, mean difference = 0.046) areas to join GE programs.

Overall, our results suggest that USIM final year students are ready to join GE programs even during COVID-19 outbreak. Regardless of gender, academic background or even internship area, USIM final year students seek to join GE programs especially which is conducted by USIM. This is likely because they realise that during this hardship time due to COVID-19, opportunity to attend enhancement skill programs like GE programs will eventually give additional values for them to embrace the challenges in seeking employment after their graduation. Besides, this finding also supports previous suggestions by Yusof and Jamaluddin (2015) where interventions at university level for the students are crucial to enhance their employability.

Employment Prospects in the Future

Table 8: Prospect of Work in the Future

Statement	Full Sample Mean	Gender		Academic Background		Internship Area		
		Male (Mean)	Female (Mean)	Science (Mean)	Social Science (Mean)	Capital City (Mean)	City (Mean)	Rural (Mean)
<i>After COVID-19, I believed that:</i>								
1. Malaysian economy is not affected	1.439	1.497	1.420	1.169	1.460	1.394	1.446	1.451
2. There are job opportunities	2.907	2.951	2.893	3.028	2.957	2.736	2.915	3.049
3. New businesses will arise and offer job opportunities	3.167	3.216	3.151	3.253	3.219	3.118	3.150	3.299
4. Furthering studies is the best option	3.114	2.971	3.160	3.740	3.174	3.106	3.107	3.103
5. Better to work in government sector	4.175	4.132	4.189	4.173	4.297	4.110	4.148	4.392
Overall Mean	2.960	2.953	2.963	3.176	3.021	2.893	2.953	3.059

Notes: male ($N = 348$) versus female ($N = 1,097$); science ($N = 243$) versus social science ($N = 1,202$); and capital city ($N = 254$) versus city ($N = 963$) versus rural ($N = 204$).

Table 8 displays the results for items relating to the employment prospects in the future. In general, the data indicates that only 59.2% (mean = 2.960) of the students believed about employment prospects after COVID-19. Among all five items under the employment prospects, the most significant is they tend to believe that it is better to work in government sector after COVID-19 (83.5%, mean = 4.175). This is followed by them believing that new businesses will arise and offer job opportunities (63.34%, mean = 3.167), furthering studies is the best option (62.28%, mean = 3.114) and there are job opportunities (58.14%, mean = 2.907). Only 28.78% (mean = 1.439) of the students believed that Malaysian economy is not affected after COVID-19.

Male and female students (0.2%, mean difference = 0.010) believed that COVID-19 affects the employment prospects in the future. However, there is a significant difference in academic background. In this case, results show that social science students (3.1%, mean difference = 0.155) who tend to believe that COVID-19 has a stronger impact on the employment prospects in the future as compared to science students. Similarly, there is a statistically significant difference in terms of position. Table 4 indicates that students who have their internships at rural area tend to believe that COVID-19 has a stronger impact on the employment prospects in the future as compared to students who are internship at capital city (3.32%, mean difference = 0.166) and city (2.12%, mean difference = 0.106) areas.

Overall, our results suggested that USIM final year students tend to believe that employment prospects in the future is quite low due to COVID-19 outbreak. Social science students, in particular, expressed higher levels of agreement to such low employment prospects in the future. This is likely because social science students face more difficulty in finding a job compared to science students (Kalamatianou & Kougioumoutzaki, 2012). However, it is surprising to know that students who had their internship at rural area have a higher belief about employment prospects after COVID-19 compared to students who have their internship at capital city and city areas. This is because previous findings indicated that rural students have lower employability as compared to urban students (Rabren et al., 2002). Perhaps this happened as students at rural area believed they can migrate to urban area for job seeking purposes later.

CONCLUSION

This survey calibrates the impact of COVID-19 on the GE of USIM final year students. Such an impact on the readiness to internship during MCO period, readiness to join GE programs and employment prospects in the future are thoroughly studied and discussed. In short, USIM final year students are ready to do their internship even during MCO period. Besides, they are also ready to join GE programs conducted by USIM even while COVID-19 pandemic is still active. Meanwhile, for the employment prospects in the future, results show that they believed that the employment prospects in the future after COVID-19 is low.

In terms of comparison among students attributes towards the impact of COVID-19 on GE, gender does not play a significant role in such a decision except for internship during MCO period. However, academic background has a significant effect on the agreement on the impact of COVID-19 on GE. In this case, social science students perceived that COVID-19 have a significant impact on the prospect of works in the future as compared to science students. Perhaps this happened as the science students especially medicine students have assurance on their placement after graduation as compared to social science students. Similarly, students who have their internship at rural are tend to have high believed that COVID-19 give a significant impact on the employment prospects in the future as compared to students at capital city and city. Perhaps this happened as economic slowdown due to COVID-19 is having more significant impact in rural areas.

It is also noted that the results on high readiness to join internship and GE programs during lockdown can be interrelated with the perceptions of students on low employment prospect in the future. In this case, by acknowledging the challenges to get the job in the near future especially after COVID-19 will make these students more active to participate in internship and GE programs even during lockdown period. They realise that by attending enhancement skill programs like internships and GE programs will eventually give additional values for them to embrace the challenges in seeking employment after their graduation.

Therefore, proactive actions must be taken especially by USIM in order to ensure that their students' GE is assured even in this situation. This includes by continuing conducting internships and GE programs as it shows high impact on USIM GE score in 2019, plus the findings on high readiness by these students to join such programs to resolve their GE problems. Related to this matter, as there is a concern on the sustainability of GE programs as previously USIM received a special GE grants from Ministry of Higher Education due to its previous low ranking in GE scores, it is suggested for USIM to raise a specific fund for GE programs in the future.

Besides, USIM also must identify potential industrial players who are actively recruiting especially fresh graduates and connect with their students. This can be achieved by strengthening the cooperation between USIM and strategic industry partners (Tran, 2016). Moreover, unprepared for new learning culture via online due to COVID-19 must be solved. In this case, any obstacles that affect the normal internship and organizing GE programs in the future can be overcome by having adequate facilities and infrastructures especially on IT. Last but not least, continuous improvement on GE programs must be done in order to ensure that GE programs can become a strong mechanism to solve GE issues in the future.

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